

WHEN YOUR PREACHER LEAVES: Interim Services for Churches Between Ministers

August, 2009, #37



Jerrie Barber and John Parker



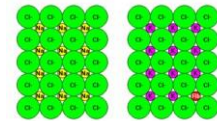
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New Elders or a New Eldership? by Jerrie Barber

It is my understanding that when new elders are appointed, there are not just new elders but a new eldership. When you have a chemical in a beaker, and a drop of another chemical is dropped into the liquid, you don't just have another drop of stuff. There is a new substance.



That happens when another person is added to a group: when a person get married, when the first child is born, when the second child is born. The dynamics of the group changes. I addressed this when I wrote about “The How and Why of an Eldership Funeral,” discussed in a former newsletter, [March 2008](#) .

When I moved from one congregation to another a few years ago, I talked with sixteen congregations. Eight of the sixteen had fired their preacher. In each case of a congregation releasing their preacher, that congregation had appointed new elders in the past two years.

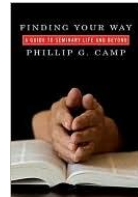
Since that time, I have made it a practice to resign each time new elders are appointed. That eldership did not ask me to work with them. This is a new eldership. If the new eldership is convinced that I am not the right preacher for that church at that time, it may save two years of manipulation and aggravation for me to remove myself from that situation. If they want me to remain, we talk about our agreements, my job

description, and our working relationship. That can make it possible for us to work together in peace.

I did that three times and each time I was invited to stay. I am convinced that it still would have been better if they had not wanted me. I would have known it. Without months of maneuvering, we would have been at a better position to encourage and support each other than if we have waited and hoped the other would come to that conclusion. Jesus said, “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32, NKJV).

Mustard Seeds from Favorite Books, Jerrie Barber

Finding Your Way: A Guide to Seminary Life and Beyond, by Phillip G. Camp, Copyright © Phillip G. Camp



A friend of mine, who also teaches, refers to this student habit of waiting until the last minute to write papers as the “eschatological view of paper writing.” That is, the student hopes the Lord will return before the paper is due, and so does not begin until the last minute. Why waste all that time if writing the paper proves unnecessary? Of course the gamble here, as many students know, is that the Lord may not return as a thief in the night on the night before the paper is due. At least he hasn’t yet. Surely there is a better way (page 21).

Finally, there is the spiritual dimension to think about in such labeling. First, as I noted above, the labels we use are often applied relative to where we stand. Thus, I make myself the center and arbiter of right and wrong, good and bad. And putting oneself in such a position is usually spiritually precarious. Second, when I simply write off someone using labels, without actually listening to him or her, I violate both the second great command – to love my neighbor as myself (Matthew 22:39) – and the golden rule – to do to others as I would have them do to me (Matthew 7:12). Thus, such uses of labels to dismiss others serve to destroy rather than build Christian community (page 32).

Note also that some people ask questions to hear themselves talk and to show, though their words are phrased as a question, that they already know the answer. Such questions often begin with “Isn’t it true that...?” Okay, I will admit it. I was often that student. What I have found is that most teachers appreciate good questions that are truly an attempt to explore an issue further. On the other hand, teachers often try to avoid eye contact or pretend they do not see the raised hands of those students who have a habit of asking simply to hear themselves talk or to show off what they know (page 35).

However, one teacher explained that he used groups precisely to give us practice for church. In the groups, I found people with whom I disagreed, likewise in church. Some were so self-assured and others had no convictions, likewise in church. Others really irritated me and I them, likewise in church. In these groups we had to learn to work together despite our differences, so also in church. And now, though I know some

of my students hate it, I require work groups in some of my classes for the exact same reasons (page 42).

If I am ever on a minister search committee and we are considering someone straight out of seminary, here are two questions I will ask. First, where did you go to church during seminary and for how long? Second, what was your role or ministry in that church? That is, were you active in the church's life? My concern is that if the candidate did not invest himself or herself in a local congregation for that two or three years, then why would I trust that person to teach me, my children, or my church about what it means to be a part of the community of God? Can I trust them to be committed to our church over the long-term since they will have avoided the most concrete expression of Kingdom life throughout their theological training?

How is it that those who plan to spend their lives in service to the church can spend two, three, or more years without actually committing themselves to a local church? Do they see it as their last chance to be free of the boredom and monotony of regular involvement in a church before they are paid to contribute to that boredom and monotony? Do they see the church as unimportant in their own spiritual development? Is church fine, as long as one is paid to go (pages 64, 65)?

A strange thing sometimes happens to those who pursue an education that is supposed to help them serve the church. Somewhere along the way, they fall out of love with the very church they feel called to serve. They would say they love the church, but what they mean is about abstract notion of the church divorced from the realities of specific churches in specific times and places. Or, they love the ideal church, which, of course, exists only in their minds (page 81).

Smile of the Month

Sometimes, of course, a smart farmer can put this animal delusion to good use. My neighbor Floyd Dexter does this regularly. Like all Vermont farmers, he gets his hay baled and under cover as fast as possible. Sometimes this means a few bales at the edge of a field aren't quite dry enough and develop a musty odor. Cows don't fancy hay with a musty odor. So Floyd keeps one little section of fence that has only three strands of barbed wire – instead of four – permitting the cows to get their heads through more easily. Then he puts the musty hay outside.



Confronted with tasty grass on the inside, and maybe a couple of bales of good hay in the feeder, the cows form a long row, heads through the fence, and eagerly chomp musty hay. According to Floyd, the cows reason like this: That hay is out of our reach because he doesn't want us to have it. Therefore it must be exceptionally good. So even at the risk of tearing our necks on this wire, let's spend the rest of the day trying to steal it. And they do (*Reader's Digest*, March, 1985, pages 47, 48).

Barber Clippings

The newsletter is late this month. My father, John T. Barber, died two weeks ago today. I appreciate the kind response of so many people. My son, Jerrie Wayne Barber, II, wrote an interesting page about him on our business web site: [Founder and History](#) .

Hendersonville is continuing the search for the next preacher. For a good preacher who wants a challenging and rewarding work, I would highly recommend the Hendersonville congregation. Interested candidates please send resumes and credentials confidentially to hcocresumes@yahoo.com .

Gail and I will be looking for another interim position when we finish here. That could be two months and it could be ten. I will be glad to discuss the interim concept with no obligation.

Jerrie Barber

jerrie@barberclippings.com

www.barberclippings.com

<http://barberclippings.blogspot.com/>

(615) 356-8371

756 Woodland Way

Nashville, Tennessee 37209-5207

Church phone: (615) 824-6622

Cell phone: (615) 584-0512

John Parker

Jill and I continue to enjoy our interim ministry at the Fairview church near Nashville. We were honored to have approximately 85 of the members to visit us at our farm near Centerville on July 25. The elders have appointed a search committee for the next pulpit minister. Those interested in submitting resumes or recommendations may send them to

Search Committee

Fairview Church of Christ

P.O. Box 899

2001 Fairview Blvd.

Fairview, Tennessee 37062

I spoke on the British hymns at for the Granny White seniors group, The Grandtimers, August 4. My book *Abide With Me: a Photographic Journey Through Great British Hymns*, continues to sell well and is approaching a second printing. Autographed copies are available at www.abidewithmehymns.com for \$19.99 plus shipping. The book is an especially nice gift for those who love the classic hymns.

John H. Parker
Johnparker22@comcast.net
www.interimcofc.com
(615) 373-4462

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